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ABSTRACT

A principal is often judged on his ability to resolve problems at the school level without appealing to superintendents and board members. Techniques for accomplishing this task include (1) clear and specific position descriptions for employees, (2) printed handbooks for employees and students, (3) fairness and consistency, (4) positive and cooperative working relationships with school employees, (5) encouragement of ideas and suggestions, (6) creation of a relationship of mutual trust, and (7) listening to parents, employees, and students. Principals should be aware of financial limitations, communicate an awareness of these limitations, and conserve resources wherever possible. They should not function as mere caretakers but should take the initiative in: implementing needed curricular and other change; involving other school leaders in this process; communicating goals and objectives to the central office; and receiving input from the staff and keeping them informed, along with the superintendent and the board, of progress being made as well as potential problems. Principals should voice disagreements and offer possible alternatives to superintendents and board members, but they should enforce established policies without indicating disagreement to the staff or the public. Principals can and should enhance their relationships with superintendents and board members by involving them in shcool activities, fostering good community relations and acknowledging support. (JBM)

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How to Build a Positive Relationship with the Superintendent and Board of Education

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My remarks today are not taken from any textbook, journal, or other publication. Neither are they the result of any seminar or conference. Rather they represent a brief discussion of some of the activities that I have found to be effective for me in my twelve years as a high school principal. My administrative experience has all been in a rural environment, but I believe the underlying principles are applicable in any setting.

Building a positive relationship with superintendents and boards of education is an age-old problem but it is absolutely essential if the system is to operate smoothly and obtain the desired results. The principal cannot devote the necessary time to the efficient operation of his school if he is constantly bogged down in defending and explaining his actions to the superintendent and board, or attempting to destroy these individuals' image to the rest of the staff. Good relations don't just happen; they must be created and nurtured.

Of primary importance in building the desired relationship is handling one's own problems within the school. The principal should not call the superintendent every time a decision must be made. He doesn't have the time to deal with these matters, and he will begin to wonder if the principal can really handle the job he has been given. The principal

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should make the decision himself and be prepared to accept the consequences of that decision.

Neither do superintendents and board members want to be bothered with continual calls or visits from dissatisfied parents or staff members. Many times a principal is judged to a great degree by the extent to which he prevents such actions. Such concerns should be resolved at the school level before they get to the central office in the form of grievances. There are a number of techniques that can be helpful in this task:

1. There should be clear and specific position descriptions for all employees within the school.
2. There should be printed handbooks for both students and employees.
3. The principal should be fair and consistent in the enforcement of policy with both students and employees.
4. The principal should work at maintaining a positive and cooperative working relationship with all employees within the school.
5. Ideas and suggestions from staff members should be encouraged.
6. One must create a relationship of mutual trust and concern with the student body by:
    a. Showing an interest in school activities.
    b. Encouraging and cooperating with civic type projects by student groups.
    c. Creating a process whereby students may

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express ideas or concerns by forming advisory committees.

d. Establishing an atmosphere such that students know they can discuss problems with the principal.

7. A principal must listen to people whether parents, employees, or students. Frequently this is all that is required, but if one does not listen the problem usually ends up with the superintendent or a board member in the form of an offended and hostile individual.

A principal can increase his status in the eyes of the superintendent and board members by unhesitantly exercising the authority that he has been given. He should take the necessary action without having to be reminded by the superintendent. If he does not do so, the superintendent may begin to wonder why the principal was not aware of the situation, or, if he was aware of it, why he hadn't taken steps to deal with it.

Positive relationships are enhanced if a principal does not pass the buck to the superintendent and board. If he is faced with making an unpopular decision or enforcing an unpopular policy, he should not imply that he disagrees with the action himself but is forced into it by the board and superintendent. To do so may have several consequences, and they are all bad. The superintendent and board will lose respect for the principal for not having the courage to do his job. The involved personnel may develop a negative attitude toward the superintendent and board, which is detrimental

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to the entire system; and they may also lose respect for the principal for not upholding his convictions.

The principal expects the superintendent and board to understand his problems, so he should make an effort to understand theirs and communicate them to his staff members. He particularly should be aware of the financial limits within which they must operate. The present economy means an increased public awareness and concern with school expenditures. Levies and bonds are failing, and some systems are being faced with reduction in state aid. This is endangering many programs that have been taken for granted. The principal must assist in communicating these facts to both staff members and patrons. He must also create an awareness that the central office cannot provide for one school what it does not provide for another. Frequently teachers do not understand why a request has been denied when it involves a minor expenditure. What they don't understand is that providing the same thing to all other schools would represent a major expenditure.

The board and superintendent are certainly appreciative of principals who can show evidence of conservation within their schools. This conservation may take the form of fuel, paper, unused sick leave, or extended life of equipment as a result of better care; but the principal must make all personnel understand that conservation in these areas will show dividends in the form of instructional supplies.

No function of the principal is more important than that of providing strong and effective leadership within his

school. The principal who consistently does so is certainly going to enhance his image with the board and superintendent. Central office administrations do not want principals to be mere caretakers, maintaining the status quo and keeping the lid on. The principal must take the initiative in implementing needed change in curriculum, scheduling, organizational patterns, and the extracurricular program. The principal does not have to personally perform the tasks involved, but he should:

1. Make the staff aware of the need for change.
2. Take the lead in considering various methods or strategies, deciding on perferred strategy, implementing that strategy, seeing that it is monitored and evaluated, and providing feedback for those involved.

An important part of the principal's leadership function can also take the form of identifying and utilizing other leaders within the school. Any progress within the school reflects well on the principal regardless of who originates the idea or coordinates the acrivities.

The superintendent and board of education will usually have a more favorable attitude toward the principal and the school if they understand what the school is attempting to accomplish. This understanding can be greatly enhanced if the school operates with a set of established goals and objectives that are clearly communicated to the central office. The principal should take the leadership in developing these goals and objectives, but they should be an outgrowth of perceived

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needs within the school. In order to assure staff commitment and cooperation in meeting these goals, the entire staff should be provided an opportunity for input in their development. Once goals are established and communicated to the superintendent and board they should be kept informed with regard to progress made toward achieving the goals.

Not only is it important to keep the superintendent and board informed about the goals and objectives of the school, it is also important to keep them apprised of potential problem situations within the school. This does not mean that the principal should expect the central office administration to solve the problem, but rather that he keeps them informed. Superintendents and board members do not like to be surprised and learn of problem situations through phone calls or visits from irate individuals. By providing these personnel with information concerning the background of the problem and action being taken, one can both save them embarrassment and put them in a better position to defend the principal and the school.

The principal should be professional in his actions toward superintendents and board members. In most cases these individuals will respect the principal who is straight-forward and frank in private discussions or working sessions. If the principal disagrees with a policy he should say so, but he should prepare to explain why and offer an alternative. Many superintendents do not object to disagreement as long as an alternative is offered, but they are not impressed with the

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individual who continually objects but offers nothing better. Above all, one should not disagree in an antagonistic or adversarial manner. Once the policy is developed the building principal should enforce it and not indicate disagreement to the staff or the public. After all, he expects the same from the personnel within the school.

The principal who is sincerely interested in a good relationship will welcome the superintendent and board members in the school. Positive results can be achieved by informing them of special classes or projects and extending an invitation to observe them in action. A cooperative relationship can be further enhanced by inviting the superintendent and board members to participate in special programs and activities and including them in social events of the staff. In most cases the more they become aware of what is happening within the school the more supportive they will become.

It is just a matter of being realistic to understand that the superintendent and board of education are pleased when they receive positive feedback from the community. It is especially important for a principal to foster such action in an era when schools are continually under fire for ineffective discipline, irrelevant course content, lowering of standards, high dropout rates, declining test scores, and a myriad of other accusations. Never-the-less, there are many aspects of any school's program that can be capitalized on to build a positive image within the community. Concerted efforts should be made to publicize students who receive academic honors;

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band, choral, and thespian groups' accomplishments; athletic successes; and innovative or successful academic programs. This can effectively be accomplished by providing information to local news sources, newsletters sent home, and taking advantage of opportunities to speak to local civic groups. Utilization of community volunteers as resource persons and members of advisory groups can also enhance the image of the school in several ways:

1. Many worthwhile ideas and talents can be utilized to actually improve the quality of offerings within the school.
2. The school administration will gain a reputation for being concerned with making the schools meet the needs of the community..
3. People who have direct, working contacts with teenagers are usually less critical of them, and they pass this opinion on to others.

Finally, a principal should not be afraid to say thanks to the superintendent and board. These individuals have difficult functions to perform, frequently while under fire, and they are just as human as the rest of us. They need to know that their efforts and accomplishments are recognized and appreciated by the people with whom they work. All of us have experienced situations in which the superintendent and board have somehow found the money to give us the extra equipment or materials that are needed for some special program or activity, have approved and supported implementation of a needed program

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in spite of opposition from some special interest group, or have released us from our regular duties to attend a special seminar or institute that was of particular interest. We should not hesitate to send a thank-you letter or in some way show acknowledgment and appreciation for these efforts. Principals should not be guilty of taking for granted and passing unheeded the dozens of times that the answer is "yes", and then becoming offended and reacting negatively to the occasional "no".

In closing, I realize that it is easy to become entangled in the daily pressures and crises of the principalship and neglect some of the less pressing activities that can foster a strong, positive relationship with the superintendent and board of education. However, the development of such a relationship is the backbone of real progress and effectiveness within the school.

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